

Mobile ICT Resources for Older Learners

This is a briefing sheet for education providers, community workers, older peoples' organisations and older people themselves. This sheet highlights some of the excellent information and communication technology (ICT) learning initiatives that are making computers available to isolated communities. The success of the examples, demonstrates that rather than lack of interest from older people, there has been a lack of access to learning provision and computer facilities.

1. The importance of ICT for older people today

Older people (those over the age of fifty) are playing an increasingly vital role in the social and economic life of the nation. They bring a wealth of ideas and experiences that can be explored and exploited with computer technology. Older people should not be marginalized, and it is important that they are given a chance to learn the skills necessary to manage their lives with the technology available. Increasingly, essential services, for day-to-day living, are being offered via the Internet. Banking, paying household bills, information about benefits, health and medical information are just some of the services already available through the Internet.

The use of ICT also widens the range of teaching and learning methods. It can offer an interactive and interesting learning experience, which can make literacy, language and numeracy acceptable to some older adults who would otherwise be reluctant to attend courses.

Alistair Baker, Microsoft UK's managing director says, 'the young old are already a significant part of the online economy. They are set to become more significant over time. We're going to see a group of wealthy older consumers, with time and money, looking to spend, but very focused on value for money.' *On the Crest of a Wave* by Jim McClellan, *The Guardian*, 18th November 2004.

In the past few years, the Internet has developed as a medium that can very inexpensively increase the range of opportunities for older people to continue to challenge their intellects. Moreover, the medium is capable of providing a level of interactivity that many find socially stimulating. During its three years of operation the U3A online programme has demonstrated that adult education programmes delivered through the Internet can make a considerable difference to the lives of isolated people in particular. Most importantly for educational purposes, however, users can access the information and communicate with others when and if they want to. *U3A Online: A virtual university of the third age for isolated older people*, Rick Swindell, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. 2002. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*. Vol 21, No. 5. September/October 2002., p414-429.

'The computer is not an extra or a toy to the visually impaired, it is a TOOL and a window into the world. I think that it has enriched my life so much. I have found that the computer has so enriched my life and learning, how to use it has been hard but the rewards have been FANTASTIC.' *May – a visually impaired learner who has become an IT trainer with the Kent Association for the Blind, Hythe, Kent.*

2. Why mobile units?

Older people can find themselves suffering from geographical isolation, lack of suitable transport and financial restraints, and therefore do not have access to computers. Also they may have problems with a lack of confidence and a resistance to trying something new. Mobile units can address these problems by bringing ICT into local areas, therefore avoiding the need to travel long distances. Offering courses in less formal settings is also more likely to attract reluctant learners.

3. Where is the training delivered?

Mobile ICT units offer computer tuition in a variety of settings, which has proven ideal for the needs of many isolated groups. Facilities have been delivered in various ways, from 'on board' vehicles, to centres such as army barracks, bowls clubs, care homes, church/village halls, libraries, pubs, own homes, schools and colleges. These units allow older people to learn in familiar environments with their friends and acquaintances. We would like to know if you are aware of any other initiatives taking place, in particular those that have been "mainstreamed" and funded on an on-going basis.

4. What courses are offered?

A wide range of courses have been delivered, for example; Adobe Photoshop, basic skills, databases, desk top publishing, digital camera use, Email, Excel, trace your family history, Internet, scanner use, PowerPoint and spreadsheets. There is a danger that courses may be planned around the organisers' priorities. This does not always match up with the potential learners needs. It is essential to get new students comfortable with learning. ICT can be used as a good introduction to wider fields of learning. Making greeting cards or pie charts can be a useful exercise but is not necessarily relevant to older participants lives. Ideas for learning should, ideally come from the people themselves. Listen carefully to what is said and seek feedback.

Mobile ICT technology has provided access to learning by offering interesting and relevant programmes for older people. Some groups have chosen to access information on the following topics: a writers' group used the Internet to access information on writers, a craft group used the laptops to look up craft sites, and artists used it to look at painters and galleries and information regarding exhibition sites in the area.

Clearly older ICT learners follow many different paths after their initial courses, and they may;

- want to master the basics for their own use
- attend further courses
- gain enough confidence to attend other courses at different venues
- use their skills for future employment
- go on to gain qualifications
- wish to pass their skills on to others

5. How do older people use IT?

Older people go on to use their new-found skills in as many different ways as the general population. Some find their computer knowledge useful in voluntary work e.g. typing correspondence or making spreadsheets for parish councils, charities etc. One user has learned to use e-mail so that he can converse in his native language (Somali) with friends and relatives, for the first time in many years. He also listens to the news in Somali via the Internet.

A survey by Age Concern and Barclays (August 2002) reveals that men aged 55+ mostly use the Internet for pursuing hobbies and finding information (78%) while women in this age group use it more as an alternative to the telephone for chatting with friends and family here and abroad (86%). The survey, conducted by ICM, also shows that almost all those who give IT a go are hooked. Two-thirds of IT users in the 55+ age group agreed that the Internet has had a positive impact on their lives. However, there are still many people aged 55+ who have never tried to use the Internet, 66% of these people say they have no intention of ever taking part in the IT revolution.

Trends indicate that it is clear that the increase in the number of families with friends or relatives overseas will impact on Internet use between the generations and email will become a serious competitor to the telephone, which is still the preferred method of contact (79%). Older IT enthusiasts are more likely to own a mobile phone if they already own a PC (77% compared to 68% of non users). They are also twice as likely to catch the texting bug along with their grandchildren.

The survey also reveals an unmistakable north/south divide with silver surfers in Manchester likely to use the Internet for hobbies (78% in Manchester compared with 69% in London). However, those in London are more likely to keep one eye on their savings by banking online (38% in London compared with 32% in Manchester). *Internet turns on men and women in different ways - new survey reveals (21/08/02). The research is the second project resulting from Web Aware, a three-year partnership between Age Concern and Barclays (www.ageconcern.org.uk/ageconcern/news_584.htm)*

6. Examples of mobile units at work

a) Cyberlink

Bridgend Library and Information Service, South Wales has a mobile ICT facility which visits socially disadvantaged areas in their locality, within the Bridgend Unitary Authority. This Cyberlink mobile ICT library has received funding from the Wales Assembly Government for the vehicle build, and a grant from the National Lottery New Opportunities Fund for running costs for three years.

Equipped with 6 computers and a satellite dish, Cyberlink provides Internet access for all its users. It is also accessible to all with a built-in lift, and room on board for wheel chair users. They work closely with organisations such as the Youth Service, Age Concern and community groups to ensure the needs of their users are met. Some of the IT areas covered: getting on line, using email, letters, posters, budgets and digital photos.

The aim of Cyberlink is to enable free access for people who do not have local ICT learning facilities. The timetable allows for open-access sessions for the general public, closed client group sessions and sessions bookable by groups or individuals. The focus

is on raising awareness of ICT learning opportunities and delivering lower level accredited courses, whilst providing clear sign posting to other providers for those wishing to develop skills at a higher level.

Learning on the bus - Bridgend County Borough residents Jeff and Pat Jones, who left school with no qualifications decided to follow an IT course with the help of the UK's largest online learning network Learndirect after they both retired. Pat said, 'We have found the course to be both interesting and useful in our retirement and have been able to fit our studies in around the other hobbies and commitments because the learning is so flexible.' Jeff and Pat are now proficient at using the Internet and are using their newly acquired skills to shop and bank online, as well as emailing friends and relatives.

b) Kent Association for the Blind (KAB)

The Kent Association for the Blind is a local charity in Kent, Bromley and Bexley. Working in partnership with the Kent County Council, Medway and the London Boroughs of Bromley & Bexley, the KAB provides services to 13,500 people who are registered as blind or partially sighted. Most of the learners are older people as they form the majority of visually impaired people in the UK. However, there are notable success stories of younger learners being helped too.

With their Wireless Outreach Network funding, from the DfES, KAB purchased 7 wireless laptops. The laptops can be used at the three Sight Centres or, increasingly, are taken out to peoples' homes for basic assessment in adaptive technology needs. The laptops have also been used at three Technology Days where around 30 people have seen adaptive technology for the first time and some subsequently joined IT classes. Moreover, they have proven useful in demonstrating to trainers what adaptive technology is available.

After students master the appropriate adaptive technology they can then move on to word processing, Internet browsing and email – depending on their needs. Learners who wish to take their IT interests further are referred to LEA centres and can study CLAIT for example. At all times, the LEAs are reminded that they can get advice and support from the Association in relation to adaptive technology needs of visually impaired learners.

The WON initiative started in June 2002 when the DfES provided approximately £8 million for a project, which was aimed at increasing access to learning through technology for socially and economically disadvantaged adults in England. Local authority adult education services, colleges, voluntary and community organisations were able to apply for capital funds to purchase wireless laptop networks. To be eligible to apply for the funds, organisations were expected to satisfy the UK Online centre brand criteria and had to implement their networks before the end of March 2003. A total of 268 organisations received funding under the initiative.

c) Computer Explorers

Age Concern and Barclays (through its Community Investment Programme) have joined forces to deliver IT learning opportunities to older people and their carers. Using buses, kitted out with the latest IT equipment, adapted for wheel chair access, and fitted with special equipment for ease of use by older people and their carers. The vehicles situated in Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Cumbria and Leicestershire, were also

sponsored by UK Online and New Opportunities Fund lottery funding.

With Barclays support Age Concern will also run four new portable IT sessions. Mobile computer equipment will be taken into day centres, residential care homes and sheltered housing to enable frail and isolated older people to access the Internet. The services on board are free to carers and people aged 60 and over.

Age Concern's IT Training booklet will be used and a CD-Rom version of the booklet will also be produced. Some of the sessions will be guided, others will be 'drop in' sessions where some of the topics covered are; email, Internet, trace your family history and there are a variety of other projects. There may be charges asked for, if working towards a qualification, for exam and certification costs.

d) Skills on Wheels

Mid-Kent College secured funding from Kent and Medway Learning Skills Council, through their Local Initiative Fund, for the equipment needed to deliver training in a range of settings. The unit procured chairs, tables and a van to provide the mobility that was essential for the programme. The van was designed to allow quick loading and unloading, and the equipment was also simple to set up and dismantle. The college incurred the costs for an additional staff salary and the suite of laptop computers. These costs were justified, as the programme intended to move towards self-sufficiency and any initial outlay would be recovered in the long term. Future funding and sustainability is tied to the number of learners that the scheme enrolls that achieve qualifications. There is no direct cost to the learner.

The College's initial target audience was older learners in residential care homes and rural communities. The aim was to provide three hour taster sessions to create demand and interest. They were interested in locating the courses in peoples' communities and using familiar, informal settings such as community centres or village schools.

Daryll Holland, IT Projects Co-ordinator explained, 'We needed to be proactive in reaching this audience. There was no point thinking that if we put together a shiny leaflet learners would be rushing to our doors. We need to go to them!' To market the programme the college had signage on the vans, basic leaflets and promotion on the college website. They also had links with intermediary organisations that already worked with the audiences they wanted to target, such as Age Concern, the Royal British Legion and Women's Institute. These organisations were invited to offer sessions to their members or clients and to provide the location and organise registration. This proved to be a very successful approach and it meant a varied programme of events and activities.

On average seven courses were delivered in a working week, covering Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Windows, how to use the scanner and how to use a digital camera. Since August 2003 they have trained 133 new learners, a large number of these have been repeat learners. They estimate that 3% of the learners on the programme have gone on to undertake training at one of the college's main sites, or with learndirect, who they work with closely.

7. Recommendations

The most important factors to a successful project are the following:

- A project leader with vision and drive.
- A project manager/coordinator with inter-personal skills, able to respond to the needs of the service.
- Tutors who are ICT literate, can organise the hardware, and who recognise the needs of those who have little or no knowledge of computers. Tutors who understand the need to make the experience positive so that the learner will want to return.
- Imaginative publicity, most of the target audience has not accessed learning previously. Why? Marketing needs to be effective and sustained to promote awareness of the project and its aims.
- Research your local area. There is a large amount of information available on the Internet that will help you identify local needs.
- Development of partnerships and associations with other appropriate organisations to reach the target audience, facilitate the exchange of information, to share resources and provide services for the benefit of the community and its citizens.
- A welcoming and informal environment.
- Be prepared to modify the learning environment to overcome any physical conditions that may affect the older learners, e.g. lack of motor skills, or impairment of hearing or eyesight.
- Consultation with the learners to ascertain what they wish to achieve. Don't assume you already know! Courses should be relevant and not imposed.
- Vehicles or premises that are in line with health and safety requirements, easily accessible and enable the promotion of the service as part of the community.
- Enough ICT equipment and access to technical support.
- A means of transporting laptops safely.
- Charges, that make training accessible to all.
- Financial support to maintain the provision of the service to ensure it isn't a one-off initiative.
- Transport of laptops - Anne Chester is the ICT Organiser working for the Redcar Adult Learning Service. The service she provides operates in 70 venues throughout Redcar. Transporting laptops was a major problem. Anne searched various sites and found the perfect solution – a trolley tutors could use to move laptops from their car to the venue and back. The one she selected is foldable and lightweight. Anne also recognised that moving equipment around puts a physical strain on tutors. All her outreach tutors take part in a 'heavy lifting' training programme. This is a one-day course provided by her local borough council. *E-learning in outreach, Glyn Owen and Khawar Iqbal. NIACE 2004.*

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Other Useful Contacts

Age Concern England

Astral House

1268 London Road

London, SW16 4ER

Tel: 020 8765 7200

Website: www.ageconcern.co.uk

For information about free Internet taster sessions being offered in your area call the Silver Surfers Festival information line on 0800 096 7777, all calls are free of charge.

Bridgend County Borough Council

Civic Offices

Angel Street

Bridgend, CF31 4WB

Tel: 01656 643643 Fax: 01656 668126

Website: www.bridgend.gov.uk

Email: talktous@bridgend.gov

Hairnet UK Ltd

Little Tufton House

3 Dean Trench Street

London, SW1P 3HB

Tel: 0870 241 5091

Website: www.hairnet.org.uk

Kent Association for the Blind

72 College Road

Maidstone

Kent, ME15 6SJ

Tel: 01622 691 357

Fax: 01622 663999

Website: www.kab.org.uk

Email: enquiry@kab.org.uk

Learndirect

Course Helpline, tel: 0800 101 901

Advice and Guidance, tel: 0800 100 900

Website: www.learndirect.co.uk

National Statistics

Neighbourhood statistics website: www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk

Useful Resources

Catching up with computers, the over-50's survival guide. Moira Stephen. Hairnet, 2001. ISBN 0130908231. £15.99

E-learning in outreach. Glyn Owen and Khawar Iqbal. NIACE 2004. ISBN 186201227X. £8.95

ICT mentors: a support skills resource for volunteers and programme co-ordinators in community and voluntary organisations. Jackie Essom. NIACE and Department for Education and Skills, 2003.
Website: www.niace.org.uk/Research/ICT/ICT_Mentors.pdf

ICT mentors in community and voluntary organisations. Briefing sheet 38. NIACE, 2003. www.niace.org.uk/information/Briefing_sheets/38_ICT_Mentors.pdf

Learning to grow Older & Bolder: a policy discussion paper on learning in later life. Sheila Carlton and Jim Soulsby. NIACE, 1999. Website: www.niace.org.uk/Publications/L/LngOlder.htm

This is the fifty-fourth in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

- 49. Sources of funding for adult learners
- 48. Older people and mentoring
- 45. Older people and learning
- 35. Cultural diversity - responding to the learning needs of older people from black and minority ethnic communities
- 31. Financial literacy and older people

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